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The Albums: selections from the press

IF WE SHOULD FALL BEHIND: SPRINGSTEEN'S SECULAR HYMNS

■ BY TIMOTHY WHITE

As with the best of American popular music, the thrust of New Orleans' earthy style of expression has always occupied a special place between sensualism, sacrilege, and simple common need. These are the things that inspired seminal Crescent City musicians as diverse as flamboyant 19th century composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk, cathouse jazz pianist Jelly Roll Morton, and the late Professor Longhair, whose oeuvre was rooted in folk idioms. These enduring folkloric elements may also have been the magnet that recently drew Bruce Springsteen to the Crescent City to shoot the music video for the eponymous single off his "Human Touch" album. Directed by Meiert Avis, the video is most notable for the recurring imagery of the lone headlamp on the cab of the ancient trolley that courses through the clip, a sad searchlight complementing the pilgrim tone of the song.

After viewing the video on my hotel TV during last week's NARM convention in New Orleans, I took a battered Walkman and two advance cassettes of Springsteen's forthcoming "Human Touch" and "Lucky Town" records along with me on a long twilight walk through New Orleans' old French Quarter. There were revelries in progress for the Feast of St. Joseph, and Bruce's music suited the heady, haunted surroundings. In his own way, Springsteen shares the bittersweet brio of Gottschalk and Longhair, and Bruce's finest moments show the same purity of purpose: to link honest impressions of the present with the meaningful folklore of our hybrid heritage.

"Human Touch" kicked in on the tapedeck as I passed the derelict municipal building that served as Jim Garrison's office headquarters in the controversial film "JFK." Locals say the dingy edifice may soon be restored as a new courthouse; observers think "Human Touch" sounds like a track that could have (but was not) left off the "Tunnel Of Love" album—in either case, it seems that something distinctive and imposing is at least being put to good use. But I wouldn't judge either New Orleans *or* the "Human Touch" album on the evidence of any single artifact.

As a song, "Human Touch" is the new beginning that "Tunnel Of Love" couldn't contain, because the crises in Springsteen's romantic life hadn't yet been resolved; some might perceive both the "Human Touch" and "Lucky Town" albums as the songwriter's meditations on his second marriage. More accurately, they seem the absorbing spiritual and artistic saga of his second chance at self-fulfillment. If you agree that "The River" (1980) revealed Springsteen waking up to the depth of his public talent, and that "Tunnel Of Love" (1987) disclosed Bruce waking up to the depth of his private myth, then the stark truth-telling of his two new albums may rouse his audience to a new awareness of the singer's impact on us.

However, the title track of "Human Touch" is more a prelude than an epitomization of the remarkably varied 14-song collection. The record really begins with "Soul Driver," whose taut, percussive tread describes a man stumbling out of a carny-like sphere, wondering if sincerity can survive in our tawdry buy-and-sell society. On the wry, remote "57 Channels (And Nothin' On)," Springsteen discovers via satellite dish that the whole planet craves the chance to make the same mistakes America has. Thus, Bruce reasons, any new information about who we are must be sought within ourselves—assuming we still retain the requisite humility for the task.

MUSIC TO MY EARS

by Timothy White

The rest of "Human Touch" is a probing quest—sometimes grievous, sometimes glorious—and well-seasoned with utterly singular potential hits like "Cross My Heart," "Gloria's Eyes," "Man's Job," and the robustly happy "Real Man"—a romp unlike anything Springsteen has ever written. Along the way, the songwriter sheds his skin right down to the sinew on such soliloquies as "I Wish I Were Blind" and "All Or Nothin' At All."

The music is crisp and rich, spare but ingeniously picturesque. Luminous electric guitar lines are often employed in place of vocal narrative, and guest vocalists swell behind the singer like organ or piano; a muted trumpet rises to supplant rhythm guitar or bass, and drums pepper the melody like horns. The lyrics evoke superstitions and lost souls, catfish and cottonwoods, black rivers and inky skies. Sex arrives as a snake bite and/or a bed of roses—"With every wish there comes a curse."

The Robert Johnson-esque dangers of the Devil's bargain are expressed more directly on the "Lucky Town" album, an intimate diary of proverbs and allegories in which Springsteen plays all the instruments except for Gary Mallabar's drums. The title track and "Leap Of Faith" display the same bright chart promise of "Human Touch" 's highlights, but the most beguiling songs may be the secular hymns about Bruce's wedding vows with Patti Scialfa ("If I Should Fall Behind") and the birth of his first son ("Living Proof").

Like Springsteen, we are all groping through a time in which religion's moral force has fallen away, with little to replace it. Entertainment is heartening because it celebrates the human scale that our government currently lacks or conceals; there is extra-industry fascination with the record charts because they are one mirror in which we can still glimpse our collective will, lending an air of control and logic to a landscape that sometimes appears on the brink of chaos. At its high end, rock'n'roll can periodically fill in the hollows of this faithless era—especially when the music espouses values that carry a ring of emotional candor. Like Gottschalk, Morton, Longhair, Johnson, or any other correspondent/composer who found poetry in the wonder of ordinary truths, Springsteen understands the anchoring role that folklore plays in the soul of a nation.

When institutions crumble and the commonwealth is imperiled, the enduring touchstones for a people are its folkways: those things created, transmitted, and ennobled by the human touch. As universal as speech, as individual as jargon, folk beliefs are the tools we devise when machines fail us, the fables we tell to chase our modern fears, the rhymes and recipes we concoct to remind ourselves how an average person might nurture his neighbor.

The greatest exponents of American popular music have always been gifted appreciators—seeing charity and courage in small moments where most observers saw little or none.

"Human Touch" and "Lucky Town" help remind us why, after World War II, the bold hybrid of rock'n'roll was spontaneously conceived: to make a common sound, bigger than the Bomb, that said the spirit of the individual will always matter most.

From tunnel to double vision

Much to muse about: Bruce Springsteen. Photograph by Aaron Rapoport

ROBERT SANDALL on Bruce Springsteen's two new albums, Human Touch and Lucky Town

The story of how and why it took Bruce Springsteen nearly five years to release a sequel to 1987's Tunnel of Love has many of the ingredients of a classic Bruce Springsteen song. It tells of a man blessed with cheerful certainties – a loving marriage, two new babies, an enormous pile of songs and a vast global audience dying to hear them – while yet apparently beset by mysterious, nagging doubts. Even now that we can all hear the finished product, this tale of two albums – **Human Touch** and **Lucky Town** (Columbia, all formats), simultaneously released last Friday – has a thoroughly Springsteen-esque, unresolved ending. The 24 songs here make up such a perplexingly mixed bag that you can't help wondering why the Boss didn't get off the production line and take a closer interest in what was happening over in quality control. Heaven knows, he has had enough time to do so.

The pivotal point in the story concerns the goings on around that period, 18 months ago, when the Human Touch album was being put together. According to Springsteen's drummer, Jeff Porcaro, at least 32 songs had been recorded in various Los Angeles studios during the preceding two years. More than enough to supply the 10 or 12 tracks required to fill one album, you might have thought, but not sufficient for Springsteen. Another song was needed, he or somebody felt, so he went home to write it.

Back on the $14m ranch in the Hollywood hills, Springsteen's muse went into overdrive. Ten new songs were swiftly written. "It became apparent that something had happened, that he was in a different mode," his manager, Jon Landau, reported later. The plan to bolt that vital extra track on to Human Touch was quietly dropped. All of these new songs were to make up another album, Lucky Town, which would neither replace Human Touch nor follow it, but appear simultaneously.

This much is known, the rest must be conjecture. The music on the two albums, however, makes it none too difficult to fill in the gaps in the story. Human Touch, distilled though it was from a heap of material nearly three times as large as we have here, is, for the most part, a distinctly lacklustre affair. Tired riffs, inconsequential melodies and lyrics that constantly teeter on the brink of self-parody are its hallmark. Cars crash and burn, the dice get rolled one last time, the streets have no mercy, it's "a hard road outta heartbreak city"; nothing seems to have changed in the 17 years since Springsteen proclaimed himself Born To Run except his power to convince.

All the exquisitely adult shadings of Tunnel of Love have likewise been sanded down into lame paeans to masculinity: lovin' is now back as a Man's Job, something a Real Man does with his baby in the back row of the cinema. In the past, and particularly in songs such as The River, Springsteen has shown a rare talent for imbuing the aspirations of small-town, blue-collar Americans with a mythic, Everyman-ish glow. When he attempts something similar here on the moralistic ballad With Every Wish, self-consciousness overwhelms him as he "sits around and laughs at the many rivers I've crossed".

> A sleek production and some guitar-heavy arrangements cannot dispel the feeling that Human Touch is Springsteen desperately trying to recreate his old self by numbers

A sleek production and some guitar-heavy arrangements cannot dispel the feeling that Human Touch is Springsteen desperately trying to recreate his old self by numbers. Anybody who heard him at the final press conference of his Amnesty International world tour in October 1988 talking about his new desire to "assert myself as a world citizen . . . and, in my music, write about a different sensibility" will be disappointed. Those who caught his additional remarks about wanting "to get American young people out of their shell" might just laugh.

There are plenty of obvious reasons why Springsteen should have lost his (human) touch during 1989/90. He had recently disbanded his E Street Band, and with their passing lost a long-term musical partner in the saxophonist Clarence Clemons. On the personal front, things were even more unsettled. Divorce from Julianne Philips (his wife since 1984), remarriage to his backing singer, Patti Scialfa, and an acrimonious and highly public court case involving two disaffected roadies must have done much to disrupt the flow of what had until then been a fairly straightforward, rock 'n' roll superstar life.

It certainly appears to have temporarily blinded Springsteen to the truth of those words he offered in summary of 1982's Nebraska album: "When you tell a story, the story is only good if it's your story in some fashion." Four years later, the ambiguous narratives and haunting tunes of Tunnel of Love were brilliantly suffused with the doubts that preceded his divorce. Three years after that, his mind seems to have gone blank.

While it isn't an album to rival his best, the home-produced Lucky Town does show Springsteen firmly on the road to recovery. Everything here is done with more spirit and conviction. It isn't just the mentions of his son and heartfelt addresses to the wife; there's an urgency back in Springsteen's voice that betrays a desire to buttonhole the listener rather than just blast and bluster away at him or impress the hell out of her. The melodies linger longer, twist unpredictably and generally shy away from anthemic surges.

It all works best on the intimate scale of a lyrical love ballad like If I Should Fall Behind or the wedding-day sketch Book of Dreams, but there are some well-judged rockers, too. Living Proof gives a stirring insight into the Springsteens' domestic arrangements (they sleep huddled in the attic to feel the power of the rain on the roof). The Big Muddy takes us back down to the river and subtly relates a dark tale of betrayal and abortion. And Souls of the Departed angrily rails against the wastage of lives in wars in the Gulf and in the ghettos of south Los Angeles.

Where Human Touch attempts to emulate the upbeat rebel-rock posturing of the 24m-seller from 1984, Born in the USA – and fails – Lucky Town usually manages to hold its own as a cautiously optimistic variation on the worried styles of Tunnel of Love. Springsteen, of course, disagrees. He has said that these two albums are the best of his career. Others in the US have countercharged that his real motive for this simultaneous double release is to free himself of his contractual obligations to his record label, Columbia. The story of Human Touch and Lucky Town may be far from over yet. □

The Boss Feels Good

Bruce Springsteen, the noted brooder, directs his passion into a celebration of happiness in his two new albums

★★★★
"Human Touch"
★★★★
"Lucky Town"
Columbia

By ROBERT HILBURN

In his first albums in more than four years, Bruce Springsteen gives us one collection to lift our spirits—the energetic "Human Touch"—and one to touch our hearts, the introspective "Lucky Town."

The common bond is a theme that Springsteen has resisted for most of his career: happiness.

Springsteen, in fact, thought long and hard 12 years ago about whether to even include on an album a song as unreservedly happy as "Out on the Street."

Determined in his music to examine life's dark challenges, the most celebrated rock singer-songwriter of the '70s and '80s worried that the tale of romantic infatuation was misleading. Life wasn't so simple or so joyous. He did finally include the song on his album "The River" because, he reasoned, there are moments, however fleeting, when everything does seem right.

Yet the sparkle of brightness remained the exception in his work. His best songs often contained the inspiring qualities of anthems, but the celebration—or moments of victory—rarely moved beyond vowing not to compromise your ideals, not to give up on dreams of better days.

The revelation of Springsteen's new albums, due in stores Tuesday, is that he is now focusing on those better days—and what makes the albums so stirring is that he continues to apply the same passion and standards that he maintained through all the years of search. This is mature rock 'n' roll with an edge—a gateway in Springsteen's career and a significant step in the evolution of rock.

It's a hard-won happiness, to be sure, that is chronicled in such centerpieces as "The Real World" (from the "Human Touch" album) and "Better Days" and "Living Proof" (both from "Lucky Town") as Springsteen writes and sings in a frequently raw, confessional style about wrong turns and self-doubts.

In the opening seconds of the "Lucky Town" album, Springsteen declares:

I'm tired of waitin' for tomorrow to come
Or that train to come roarin' 'round the bend
I got a new suit of clothes, a pretty red rose
And a woman I can call my friend. . . .
These are better days baby
Yeah, there's better days shining through

He sings with the bite of his greatest rockers, and the arrangement is as full-bodied as the E Street Band anthems, which should ease fears of longtime Springsteen fans who worried that the dismissal of the old band would result in a drastic change in his musical style.

Springsteen plays most of the instruments on the "Lucky Town" album, giving the 10-song collection the intimate, deeply revealing (though never the desolate) feel of 1982's "Nebraska."

The arrangements are more fully punctuated on the "Human Touch" album, which is why it is likely to be the more commercially successful of the collections. Backed by a core of musicians that includes keyboardist Roy Bittan (the sole E Street Band holdover), bassist Randy Jackson and drummer Jeff Porcaro, Springsteen moves from the jukebox-ready R&B grooves of "Man's Job" to the blues-edged

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Springsteen

Continued from Page 3

spark of "Cross My Heart" to the ringing guitar sting of "Gloria's Eyes."

But it's the thoughts in the albums that hit hardest.

Through most of his earlier albums, Springsteen's vision seemed shaped by the anger and disillusionment he felt as a young man when he saw how those around him often had their aspirations and dreams stripped away by outside forces.

Here, however, he warns that internal forces can be equally damaging, how it is sometimes easier to let the ideal of a better day keep you from making the commitments in your personal life that allow you to open yourself up to moments of comfort and joy.

While both albums contain traces of the theme, there is more consistent attention to it in "Lucky Town," which is why it is the more immediately compelling of the two works.

Nothing is more chilling emotionally—or telling thematically—than "Living Proof," a gripping, multidimensional song that begins with expressing the awe and appreciation of a new father:

Well now on a summer night in a dusky room
Come a little piece of the Lord's undying light
Crying like he swallowed the fiery moon
In his mother's arms it was all the beauty I could take
Like the missing words to some prayer that I could never make
In a world so hard and dirty, so fouled and confused
Searching for a little bit of God's mercy
I found living proof

What makes the introspective song so moving is that Springsteen uses the moment of happiness to acknowledge the times of past trial and doubt that once were a barrier to his own emotional fulfillment:

You do some sad, sad things baby
When it's you you're tryin' to lose
You do some sad and hurtful things.
I've seen living proof

Elsewhere in the song, he addresses the child's mother, who apparently helped the song's narrator overcome emotional handicaps and confusion:

You shot through my anger and rage
To show me my prison was just an open cage
There were no keys no guards
Just one frightened man and some old shadows for bars

It's hard in all this to know just how much is autobiographical, but everything about Springsteen's past music tells us that at least part of the song is self-examination.

The new albums arrive at a time when Springsteen's commitment and integrity have been widely questioned; a time when this private man made tabloid headlines

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Springsteen

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through a divorce, the breakup of his band, the move from his New Jersey roots to a Beverly Hills estate and marriage to E Street Band singer Patti Scialfa.

In some ways, the man who had helped restore terms like *hero* and *integrity* to rock seemed out of control. The key question was how all these changes would affect his music.

The first hint of his new direction was during a 1990 benefit concert in Los Angeles in which he previewed "Real World," a key song on the "Human Touch" album. Sitting at the piano, he defined in the song the essential message of the two new albums:

Mister trouble come walkin' this way
Year gone past feels like one long day
But I'm alive and I'm feelin' all right
. . . Just me and you
And the love we're bringing
Into the real world.

Mirroring the optimism of the song, most of "Human Touch" deals with Springsteen's regaining the joy of playing music after the hard days of the divorce and the accompanying distractions. The songs are catchy, seductive and appealing, even though some of it seems a bit studio-slick. There are important themes in the songs—sometimes cloaked in the humor of "57 Channels (And Nothin' On)" or "Real Man"—but it's the music that propels the series of tunes.

"Lucky Town," which was recorded after "Human Touch" was completed, extends Springsteen into the more revealing and personal territory—the stripping away of emotional layers that has accompanied his greatest breakthroughs.

The failure of his first marriage must have been devastating to Springsteen because for years he had claimed there was no place in his life for permanent relationships—that his music and his restless, lone-wolf lifestyle made them essentially impossible.

Yet he eventually felt a need for a family and finally took a chance. To see it explode in unhappiness raised questions about himself and his future. That's why much of the music is about taking chances, phrases like *roll of the dice* and *leap of faith.*

He took another chance on romance and commitment—and this time it worked.

Yet the songs aren't just odes to happy endings.

In one of the most complex and moving songs, he sings about the death of a soldier during the Persian Gulf War and then the murder of a 7-year-old on a playground in Compton.

He then reflects:

Tonight as I tuck my own son in bed
All I can think of is what if it would've been him instead
I want to build a wall so high nothing can burn it down
Right here on my own piece of dirty ground.

The conflict is obvious. He has the money and power to protect his child in ways other families don't—and it's unsettling in what it says about class and power.

For years, expressions of happiness were considered dangerous for rock's great artists because it might bring complacency. But you don't have to sacrifice your artistic instincts when acknowledging moments of comfort and tenderness. In these two albums, Springsteen offers living proof. □

Robert Hilburn is The Times' pop music critic.

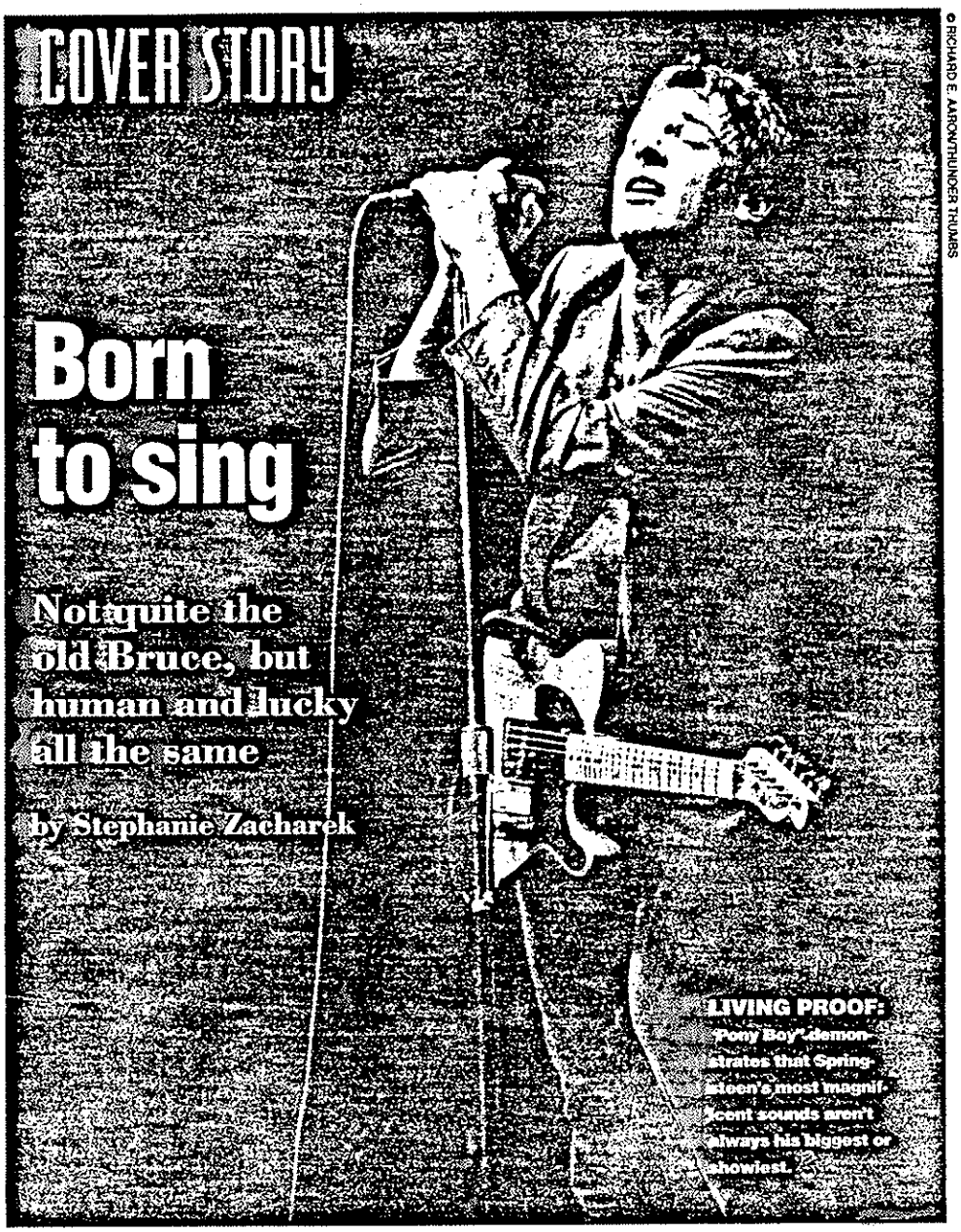
Albums are rated on a scale of one star (poor) to four (excellent).

COVER STORY

Born to sing

Not quite the old Bruce, but human and lucky all the same

by Stephanie Zacharek



© RICHARD E. AARON/THUNDER THUMBS

LIVING PROOF: "Pony Boy" demonstrates that Springsteen's most magnificent sounds aren't always his biggest or showiest.

If you find it too unforgivably irreverent to call Bruce Springsteen's *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* (both on Columbia) Skipper and Little Buddy, you might think of them as Mutt and Jeff. Either way, the two records — so different, it makes sense that they've been packaged as two discrete releases — lean against each other like hobbled old war veterans; each helps fill in the inadequacies of the other.

And there are plenty of inadequacies, but it's still worth picking through them for the stuff with spark. *Human Touch* (produced by Springsteen, Jon Landau, Chuck Plotkin, and former E-Streeter Roy Bittan) is the over-friendly, overfed puppy of the two: it's got an outsized, slickly groomed Top 40 sound that fairly leaps at you. There are times, too, when its passion seems pasted on, like a fake moustache.

Lucky Town (produced by Springsteen, with help from Plotkin, Landau, and Bittan) sits more comfortably at the other end of the scale: it's more reserved, more relaxed, duskier — a sound you can luxuriate in. Its sound seems better suited to Springsteen's current material, but *Human Touch* has taken the lion's share of standout songs. As different as the two records are, they're like interlocking pieces of a puzzle; you could hardly have one without the other.

The biggest problem with the pair is that Springsteen sounds so rational — sometimes to the point of being dispassionate. *Lucky Town* and *Human Touch* are festooned with all the Springsteen trademarks, effective to varying degrees. You've got your rough-hewn, intimate-sounding blues-based tunes, peopled with confused rogues; your rave-ups about seizing the day and searching for redemption; and your heartfelt explorations of yearning desperation. But as you might expect from Springsteen at this stage of his life, most of the songs here aren't about searching for things that are good and true. They're about hanging onto the ones you've found.

In years past, he's shown a knack for drawing characters that might blow your head off or unlock the unruly secrets of the universe — sometimes you could hardly tell which was the more likely to happen. Today Springsteen is as ruminative as ever, but (with a few notable exceptions) he seems reluctant to fling open any Pandora's boxes, as he did on the title track of 1982's *Nebraska*. That song was a thumbnail sketch of a man (modeled after Charlie Starkweather) who's just grabbed his sweetie and gone on a shooting spree. The only explanation he can offer for his behavior is, "Well sir I guess there's just a meanness to this world." Armed with a lone acoustic guitar, Springsteen recounts the man's last request: "Sheriff, when the man pulls that switch sir and snaps my poor head back/You make sure my pretty baby is sittin' right there on my lap."

What's so shocking about "Nebraska" is the killer's chilling nobility; he's hardly admirable, but you scare yourself by sympathizing with him. His "sir" is so respectful, so polite, so effective a device, that it turns him into a victor over the sheriff and the rest of us as well. Springsteen doesn't give us the option of taking the moral high ground. He wrenches compassion out of us.

After the claustrophobic *Nebraska*, the wide-open spaces of 1984's *Born in the U.S.A.*, with its crisp, polished (if at times overwrought) sound, was a relief. Some dismissed the record as being too commercial, but it's hard to make that argument stick, even after the title track was played to death on radio. By the end of that song, Springsteen (as a returned Vietnam soldier) has repeated the bitter chant "Born in the U.S.A." so many times, his "born" has mutated into a bray, the sound of some anguished, trapped animal. He was showing us how the phrase could be twisted to mean anything — or nothing. That ambiguity undercuts the song's commercial sheen.

Neither *Lucky Town* nor *Human Touch* gives us anything as rich or as raw, but there's a comforting solidity to both records. Springsteen is still doing all those typical Springsteen things: looking for redemption, thinking, *thinking* about his feelings every minute, fashioning even his most base urges into lines that radiate an almost gentlemanly dignity. He could never be complacent (or even, perhaps, content) enough to make a true fat-and-happy record on the level of, say, Van Morrison's *Tupelo Honey*.

Often, though, the subtext shining through these songs is "I can hardly believe I'm so happy. Please, God, don't let me mess up." As if he felt unworthy of happiness. It's much easier to connect with the material on 1987's *Tunnel of Love*; there, Springsteen stared right into the beckoning maw of romance and saw mostly sharp teeth and inky blackness.

Maybe that's why songs like "Leap of Faith" (*Lucky Town*) fail to stir. Here, Springsteen seems to be trying too hard for the big uplift: his words sound stretched out and forced, and even the quiet swell of a gospel-tinged chorus (consisting of Lisa Lowell, Soozie Tyrell, and Springsteen's wife, Patti Scialfa) comes off as overkill. Occasionally, he's as guilty as anyone of overwriting lyrics, and it's hard to forgive him his excess here: "Now you were the Red Sea I was Moses . . . The waters parted and love rushed inside/I was Jesus' son sanctified."

At times, it's hard to know what Springsteen is trying to prove; at others, it's painfully obvious. His "Living Proof" (*Lucky Town*) was probably intended to be a tough little song about the miracle of birth ("Well now on a summer night in a dusky room/Comes a little piece of the Lord's undying light") and how it can change a man. But Springsteen is explaining the change rather than dramatizing it. The real drama of that change is found on *Human Touch* when Springsteen and Scialfa sing the traditional children's song "Pony Boy," accompanied by only an acoustic guitar and a honey-sweet harmonica. "Pony Boy" is the quintessential father/son song, a lullaby for a little man. It speaks of a tender partnership: "O'er the hills and through the trees/We'll go ridin' you and me." It's a near-revelation to hear those lyrics in Springsteen's cracked, weather-beaten voice, if only because it's the first time we've really seen him as a dad. "Pony Boy" *shows* us what "Living Proof" merely talks about.

What's more, the song is proof that on these two records Springsteen's most magnificent sounds aren't always his biggest or showiest. *Human Touch*'s "Roll of the Dice" opens with a keyboard flourish — courtesy of Bittan — that seems lifted straight from Springsteen's E-Street Band days (bassist Randy Jackson and drummer Jeff Porcaro round out the *Human Touch* personnel). But the song tries too hard to catch us in its majestic sweep; and as terrific as Bittan's bright, inquisitive keyboards sound, their E-Street sound only helps freeze the song in a time that's long gone. It's a little scary to think that Springsteen may be looking to relive his own glory days so soon.

Fortunately, other songs dispel that fear, particularly "The Big Muddy" (from *Lucky Town*, on which Springsteen plays virtually all instruments, with Gary Mallabar on drums). It's an ominous blues tune, underpined by a calm — yet still faintly menacing — wash of guitar and drums. Springsteen breaks that calm with steely pings from a second guitar; his restrained, iron-filigree phrases seem to have been wrought in a fierce fire. What's most startling, though, is that he sounds as if he'd gone the route of the old bluesmen and sold his soul; there's no other way a human being can sing like that. As he crawls his way through lines like "How beautiful the river flows and the birds they sing/But you and I we're messier things/There ain't no one leavin' this world buddy/Without their shirttail dirty/Or their hands bloody/Waist deep in the big muddy," it's as if he'd peeled his skin back to reveal bare nerves.

In the end, it's the spare songs that work best. Springsteen accompanies himself on bass on *Human Touch*'s "57 Channels (and Nothin' On)," in which a spurned lover blows his television set out, Elvis-style, with a .44. "I Wish I Were Blind" (also from *Human Touch*) is an obvious companion piece to Etta James's "I'd Rather Go Blind." When Springsteen sings, "Though this world is filled with the grace and beauty of God's hand/Oh I wish I were blind when I see you with your man," his voice is so controlled, so deadened with despair, it seems an essential blood vessel has been severed.

But the loveliest, most moving song of all may be *Lucky Town*'s "My Beautiful Reward." The words ("I was so high I was the lucky one/Then I came crashing down like a drunk on a barroom floor/Searching for my beautiful reward") are set against an austere, almost hymn-like melody — the tune is pulled along, like a royal barge through a tranquil river, by a gentle acoustic guitar and Ian McLagen's buttery Hammond organ. Springsteen sings the line "Searching for my beautiful reward" not as a statement but as a question, a puzzle he has yet to work out. The song itself could be the elusive prize — it's so luminous, it seems to float just ahead of Springsteen's grasp.

"My Beautiful Reward" reads like the adult version of the adolescent yearning to break free heard in "Born To Run," but it's hardly staid. If anything, it's even more urgent: when you're young, the world seems so vast, yet you believe you can drink it. The older you get, the more you realize you can only seize it piecemeal, and you can never collect all the pieces you'd like. A song like "My Beautiful Reward" may be Springsteen's best shot at reaching his aging, sometimes sentimental audience and hitting them where they live. ❑

BY MARK COLEMAN

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN IS BACK, BUT IS HE STILL BOSS?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
LUCKY TOWN ★ ★ ★ 1/2
HUMAN TOUCH ★ ★ ★
COLUMBIA

Faced with the hazy shades of middle age and a rapidly changing pop scene, Bruce Springsteen is drifting a bit — though he isn't lost. On this double-fisted serving of new material, Springsteen, who remains an eloquent social observer and potent rocker, occasionally resembles one of his own carefully etched smalltown characters. Restless and ready for Something Bigger, he can't quite leave behind his old haunts and familiar habits.

Characteristically, Springsteen thrashes out his dilemma right there in the grooves — with unyielding honesty and several deeply catchy choruses. On the tightly wound *Lucky Town*, he untangles some thorny feelings about love and marriage, resolving them (for now) with a subtly nuanced ballad called "My Beautiful Reward." *Human Touch* is where Springsteen's unyielding musical conservatism finally catches up with him, though; there's an extended stretch in the middle of this hour-long album where the three-chord pump-ups ("All or Nothin' At All," "Real World") become dangerously indistinguishable.

That's a shame, because the very best of *Human Touch* would fit right onto *Lucky Town*. "Human Touch," the wonderfully sharp "57 Channels (And Nothin' On)," "The Long Goodbye," the tender acoustic "Pony Boy" — those sterling tracks would flesh out the forty-five minute long *Lucky Town* and complement its theme of hard-won personal stability in a turbulent world. As it is, longtime fans patient enough to sift for gold in a pebbly stream will probably be rewarded by both albums. More casual listeners may long for a tighter overall focus like the poetic inward gaze of 1987's *Tunnel of Love* or the outward pop thrust of 1984's *Born in the U.S.A.* These days, Springsteen is stuck somewhere between those two poles; *Lucky Town* and *Human Touch* record the rough sound of a supercharged talent shifting gears. Not into reverse, hopefully.

SPOTLIGHT

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
Human Touch
PRODUCERS: Bruce Springsteen, Jon Landau, Chuck Plotkin, Roy Bittan
Columbia 53000

Springsteen enters the '90s with two simultaneous releases that chronicle his thoughts since 1987's "Tunnel Of Love." While both albums find Springsteen focusing on personal themes instead of global issues, "Human Touch" is the more musically adventurous of the two, as well as more radio-friendly. In addition to the soaring, vintage Boss title track, key cuts include the haunting, cautionary "With Every Wish" (with beautiful muted trumpet by Wayne Isham), rollicking "Roll Of The Dice," glorious "Real World" (with soaring background vocals by Sam & Dave's Sam Moore), and the hilarious indictment of our times, "57 Channels." "Real Man," propelled by David Sancious' organ, has a Stax/Volt groove the likes of which Springsteen has never committed to tape before. The rest of the band: Bittan, bassist Randy Jackson, and drummer Jeff Porcaro help carry out Springsteen's vision. Rock'n'roll the way it should be done.

SPOTLIGHT

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
Lucky Town
PRODUCERS: Bruce Springsteen, Jon Landau, Chuck Plotkin, Roy Bittan
Columbia 53001

If "Tunnel Of Love" was about the breakup of a marriage, "Lucky Town" is about the buildup of a family. Though guest musicians are scattered throughout, by and large, all instruments on this album are played by Springsteen. The result is spare, lean tunes that match the often deeply personal and introspective, searching lyrics. Most affecting are wedding anthem "If I Should Fall Behind," the romantically sensual "Book Of Dreams," and "Living Proof," a beautifully redemptive tale inspired by the birth of Springsteen's son. While the number of evident singles isn't as high here as on "Human Touch," jubilant "Leap Of Faith," like leadoff "Better Days," fairly jumps off the CD and begs to be heard on the radio. "Human Touch" is incredible as a rock record, but "Lucky Town" is brilliant as one man's statement of his life captured at a certain time.

THE TIMES
SATURDAY MARCH 28 1992

Reborn to run after leaving New Jersey

David Sinclair reviews a brace of Bruce Springsteen albums, his first since he abandoned his blue-collar roots for Los Angeles

The myth of Bruce Springsteen has been all but blown to pieces. In the five years since he released his last album, *Tunnel of Love*, New Jersey's most famous son — adored for his songs emphasising the plain virtues and continuity of life in his native blue-collar community — has pulled up stakes and moved to a $14 million estate in Beverly Hills.

The man whose music and lifestyle boasted an integrity which supposedly placed him above the grubby goings-on so depressingly typical of celebrity musicians, was depicted by the British tabloid newspapers as apparently two-timing his wife, whom he subsequently divorced. And the performer whose working practices have been built on longstanding foundations of loyalty dismissed the E Street Band. That was the extraordinary team of musicians featuring saxophonist Clarence Clemons, which had given him sterling service since the start of his career and played a key role in defining the Springsteen sound.

Unremarkable behaviour by the standards of most rock stars, perhaps, but among Springsteen's more obsessional fans a mood of disillusionment is abroad. In December *The Los Angeles Times* reported that subscriptions to the Seattle-based Springsteen fanzine, called *Backstreets*, were down by almost 65 per cent from a mid-Eighties high of 25,000. According to *Backstreets* editor Charles Cross: "In some very real ways, he is on trial. I don't think the American public is as forgiving of Bruce Springsteen as they were in the Eighties."

The simultaneous worldwide release yesterday of two new albums — *Human Touch* (catalogue number Columbia 471423 2) and *Lucky Town* (Columbia 471424 2) — comes, therefore, at perhaps the most critical point in Springsteen's career since the early Seventies. His tenth and eleventh albums comprise 24 songs, all new Springsteen compositions, 98 minutes of music in all.

They constitute a superb body of work, much of it as good as anything he has previously recorded. There could be no more eloquent rebuttal of the charge that he has in some way drifted loose from his emotional and spiritual moorings.

Human Touch is the more substantial of the two collections, quantitatively at any rate: 14 tracks, clocking in at just under an hour. Here the band comprises E Street keyboardist Roy Bittan, bassist Randy Jackson and drummer Jeff Porcaro with occasional backing vocal contributions from the new Mrs Springsteen (Patti Scialfa), Bobby Hatfield, Sam Moore and others. Springsteen takes care of the guitar parts himself, playing with surprising panache, especially on "Cross My Heart" and "Man's Job" where he furnishes a rich, Duane Eddy-style twang.

Apart from a couple of tracks which hark back to the overblown "showband" sound of the *Born To Run* era — "Roll of the Dice" and "Real World" — the instrumentation is strong but economical, ranging from the rocky tumble of "All or Nothin' at All" to the quietly philosophical "With Every Wish", where a sparse arrangement is delicately coloured by the dappled tones of Mark Isham's muted trumpet.

As one might expect in the wake of recent personal upheavals, the mood of the album is complex and contradictory, though its principal theme is the ever-shifting and frequently painful course of true love. On some tracks he is in a bullish mood: on "Man's Job" he insists that "Takin' care of you darlin ain't for one of the boys."

But more often the songs betray feelings of vulnerability, self-doubt and, on "I Wish I were Blind", old-fashioned jealousy. "Built a roadside carnival out of hurt and self-pity," he sings in "Real World". "It was all wrong, well now I'm movin' on."

Lucky Town is both shorter (10 tracks; 39 minutes) and sharper than its companion. Here Springsteen plays all the instruments himself, apart from the drums (Gary Mallabar), and the album is dominated by an even more basic, guitar-driven sound.

Of the two it is *Lucky Town* which has the edge. Opening with the gloriously optimistic flourish of "Better Days" and followed by the romping, similarly positive title track, the album sounds like the work of a man waking from a bad dream. In "Local Hero" he takes a wry tilt at the impossible extremes of adulation and antipathy which a performer at his level has to face: "First they made me the king then they made me pope/Then they brought the rope."

A string of warm, idealised love songs is interrupted by a desert-baked Ry Cooder-ish number called "The Big Muddy", Springsteen again displaying his previously unsuspected reserves as a guitarist. "There ain't no one leavin' this world buddy/Without their shirttail dirty/Or their hands bloody," he declares with grim satisfaction.

Clearly Springsteen is not, and doubtless never has been, the paragon of virtue that might have been suggested by earlier publicity and accepted by the credulous. But his skill and honesty as a writer and performer continue to shine through in his music, regardless. If any of his fans are foolish enough to desert him over these two albums, it is they who will be the losers.

TIME OUT April 1-8/92

MUSIC

Preview

A touch too much

NICK HORNBY ON THE NEW SPRINGSTEEN ALBUMS

Not all Bruce Springsteen fans are the hairy-chested, foot-stomping, cloth-eared emotional retards of snob legend; some of us even read books, and have relationships, and possess exquisitely tasteful record collections. And for us, new Springsteen product is an event, a big deal, even after all this time and all those jokes.

How can anyone who has ever really loved post-war American pop music not find time for him? Here, after all, is someone who has synthesised every great record he has ever heard, white and black, folk and doo-wop, blues and soul, frat-rock and surf, into something that is triumphantly his own. His albums have worn much better than the cars and girls jibes, mainly because he has always been more aware of irony and metaphor than his detractors would credit (Everything But The Girl, who on the face of it oppose what Springsteen represents, understand the torque that made 'Tougher Than The Rest' such a great song). And it is no longer possible to snicker at Bruce's belief in the redemptive power of rock 'n' roll. 'Tunnel Of Love' was unmistakably the work of a grown-up, and sounded as melancholy and as wounded and as confused as grown-ups do.

Five years on (what do pop stars *do* all day?) we are presented with not one but two new records, 'Human Touch' and 'Lucky Town'. Even the Bossiest fan would have to concede that this is an ill-advised and cynical piece of hype (cf Guns N' Roses): these 24 songs could have been released as a double album, or a long-play CD, but of course nobody would have been able to charge £25 for it. 'Human Touch', 20 minutes and four songs longer than 'Lucky Town', is the proper record, the one that all the work has gone into. ('Lucky Town' popped out like an unexpected twin when Springsteen was trying to record a final song for 'Human Touch'). And having already outed myself so embarrassingly, it pains me to have to say that it is almost useless.

There is one great song. 'With Every Wish' is a limpid, world-weary ballad which reveals itself through its imagery, its melody and its beautiful muted trumpet — the only instrumental colour on the album. And if you want to clutch at straws, 'I Wish I Were Blind' is a pretty, if utterly conventional love song. The rest, however, sounds like a Sprinsteen-hater's idea of Springsteen. I wouldn't want to have to defend 'Man's Job' ('loving you is a man's job, baby') or 'Real Man' ('your love's got me feeling like a real man') to a non-believer, and I certainly wouldn't want to have to explain the difference between them. The man who used the Brecker Brothers' horns to brilliant effect on 'Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out' all those years ago now relies on old pal Roy Bittan to give the odd synthesised toot on his keyboards (hardly any piano anywhere, regrettably); the mediocre air-brushed swamp-rock that flavours a good half of the songs here is the missing link between so-so Creedence and Bryan Adams. The fact that the overblown power-chord single appears positively accomplished in this company is indicative of the album's crushing mediocrity.

Wouldn't you just know, though, that 'Lucky Town', the after-thought, the bastard younger brother, is a more engaging collection. The title track is a rocker with a wonderful drawling chorus; 'Book Of Dreams' and 'If I Should Fall Behind' are as tender as he writes 'em. At the fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour, real songs with real tunes emerge, and you can almost — but not quite — forgive him the rest.

When we were young we used to seize upon the reported marital discord and political disgust of our pop heroes gleefully; it was evidence that they were about to come up with something *real*, something painful and challenging and raw. And then we concluded that this was daft, and then Bruce gets divorced and makes 'Tunnel Of Love', and then he gets married again, and becomes a daddy, and comes up with '57 Channels (And Nothing On)'. Maybe we were right the first time.

Reborn, and Running Again

After more than four years, Bruce Springsteen releases a pair of spellbinding albums, mostly about love

By JAY COCKS

PAM SPRINGSTEEN

Dynamite: a resilient rocker

These are two wonderful records about the light at the end of the tunnel of love. Forget all you have heard and read since Bruce Springsteen's two advance singles were released in the U.S. three weeks ago—unless, of course, you listened to the songs, in which case you could ignore all the inside show-biz reporting about how radio stations were a little skeptical and record stores a little uncertain, and was Bruce, at 42, a family man with two kids, a little too settled and a little too wealthy and a little too out of touch to burn the house down?

Well, the house is on fire. The singles sang for themselves: the plaintiveness of *Human Touch;* the explosive emotional release of *Better Days,* one of the best tunes Springsteen has ever written. The albums—*Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*—are a twin testament to the power of redemptive love, to the resilience of Springsteen's gifts and to the restless spirit.

His last album, *Tunnel of Love,* was released 4½ years ago in the U.S. The final record made with the E Street Band, it was like an unstanched wound. The songs were usually interpreted as a reflection of his considerable personal turmoil. *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town,* as the titles suggest, are about putting smashed pieces together, about measuring loss and transcending it. Whatever he staked on these records, he's got it back on one *Roll of the Dice.*

That tune comes midpoint on *Human Touch* and catches Springsteen in full cry as a "thief in the house of love," doing one of those dynamite rave-ups that can bring stadium crowds to their feet. *Human Touch* was the first of the two albums to be completed, and, with the backing of some heavy-duty Los Angeles session players and such soulful voices as Bobby King and Sam Moore, it has a real diamond-cut luster and precision. It also has plenty of nerve. Two tunes, *Man's Job* and *Real Man,* trash all the stereotypes of rock lyrics ("Now if you're lookin' for a hero, someone to save the day,/ Well, darlin', my feet they're made of clay") and present love—looking for it, nurturing it, keeping it—as the real man's job.

While Springsteen was trying to decide whether his *Human Touch* album was actually finished, he returned to the studio and emerged, only about eight weeks later, with the 10 songs on *Lucky Town.* The sound is somewhat sparer here, the lyrics rougher around the edges and maybe even better for that. *Better Days,* which kicks the record off, has already attracted some comment for the lines, "Now a life of leisure and a pirate's treasure don't make much for tragedy." It's as if Springsteen were taking a long, hard look at himself, but the key lines are the ones that follow: "But it's a sad man, my friend, who's livin' in his own skin and can't stand the company."

A measure of sadness suffuses these records. But there is also an urgent hope, a rush of spirit, a *Leap of Faith,* in which Springsteen combines sexual and sacramental imagery in a great erotic epiphany. And there is a new kind of sorcery too. Springsteen ends *Lucky Town* with the eerie spirituality of *My Beautiful Reward,* which is a unique combination of a Van Morrison religious song and a Native American peyote dream. It's a step into the mystic, a new direction. Springsteen's reborn and running again. ■

PHOTOMONTAGE: EMMA BAGNALL

The Boss: he may have started out with a mop-top schoolboy haircut but his fans loved him best in his gruff, scruffy incarnation as no-nonsense rock star, reassuringly present on the new album covers

MUSIC

Baby, We Were Born to Last

The '90s Springsteen celebrates domestic bliss

One of the drawbacks of being an icon is that life changes around you. Since Bruce Springsteen last released an album, the unassuming "Tunnel of Love," in 1987, a lot has passed. His marriage to actress Julianne Phillips, unsettled at the time of "Tunnel of Love," finally dissolved, both in the pages of People magazine and in real life. He married backup singer Patti Scialfa and dispatched his E Street Band, his constant musical companions since 1972. A longtime booster of his native New Jersey, he moved to a $14 million estate in Beverly Hills. Springsteen is now 42, settled down with two children: Evan James, 20 months, and Jessica Rae, 3 months. As one of his ex-musicians told The Boston Globe, "This is not the same guy whose every waking moment 17 years ago was rock and roll."

He responds to his time away with two new albums, "Human Touch" and "Lucky Town," both due in stores this week. He recorded "Human Touch" first, then went looking for one more song to complete it. When that song emerged as the resoundingly affirming "Living Proof" (box), he realized he was onto a new theme, grist for a new album. Working mostly alone in his home studio, he wrote and recorded the rest of what became "Lucky Town."

Roughly speaking, "Human Touch" is a volume of unmade connections, "Lucky Town" of made ones. "We switched 'round and 'round till half past dawn," he sings on the former, "There was 57 channels and nothin' on." Lost in a cable system, he could be adrift in Woody Guthrie's barren Dust Bowl: the dirt he hacks up, the wasted pixels, are all the same. Springsteen has found Guthrie's resilient black humor. When his character shoots up the TV in the name of Elvis, pop culture liberates a man from despair, rather than choking him in it. But still, he wanders through most of the album, looking for connection, for a human touch: "I wanna find some answers, I wanna ask for some help." On "Lucky Town," he finds it. The album hits its stride with the refrain, "These are better days, baby," and only goes up from there. And though this world may hold no subject more tedious than the joy of upwardly mobile paternity, Springsteen makes it work as deliverance. There's enough cleansing rain in these songs to flood Oklahoma.

Five years is a long time to be away, both for performer and audience. During Springsteen's absence, the white working class he has so warmly painted for the last two decades has spun out in the public eye. Once a romantic conceit, it has devolved into a liberal scapegoat, blamed for racism, sexism, David Duke, what have you. The world Springsteen left in 1987, and the place he held in it, no longer exist for him. His characters' old trips to "Jungleland" can no longer play as romantic, innocent rides. The current voices of the back streets—Guns N' Roses, N.W.A, Metallica, Depeche Mode—all confront this new suburban order, offering pathology rather than romance. In their wake, Springsteen's notion of a darkness lurking on the edge of town is almost quaint.

At moments on both new albums, Springsteen seems unsure of who he's supposed to be. More than that, it's unclear in 1992 what he's supposed to *mean*. His identity, which has always been bedrock, wavers, shivering behind a suspect accent or a forced lyric. His vision is sure and fresh as long as he's in his home; outside of it, he sometimes appears to be serving plums from someone else's imagination. "Ol' catfish in the lake, we called him Big Jim," he sings, a funny notion for a guy who can no longer even play suburban sophisticate without slumming.

Domestic salvation: But at their best, the new songs seem to tumble whole from our own lives: they're so open and universal that even a solid presence like Springsteen's can't cramp them. The domestic salvation he describes—and the religious language is correct—almost defies individuality. Pop music doesn't get any more straightforward: "I'll wait for you," he sings, "And should I fall behind / Wait for me." Though the new rockers are celebratory—all chorus and rushing momentum—"Human Touch" and "Lucky Town" work more like good country music, celebrating permanence rather than dramatic conflict or change. If they lack some of Springsteen's brilliant, cathartic heights, they make it up in the soft, steady strength that comes with his new material. They're worth the wait.

JOHN LELAND

Well now all that's sure on the boulevard
Is that life is just a house of cards
As fragile as each and every breath
Of this boy sleepin' in our bed
Tonight let's lie beneath the eaves
Just a close band of happy thieves . . .
It's been a long, long drought baby
Tonight the rain's pourin' down on our roof
Looking for a little bit of God's mercy
I found living proof

—FROM LIVING PROOF

ILLUSTRATION BY PHILIP BURKE

INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY March 29

One for my baby and two for the road

ROCK

RICHARD WILLIAMS

THE FIRST time I saw Bruce Springsteen, from the front row of the Hammersmith Odeon in 1975, he looked like the young Al Pacino: small, dark, quick, funny and magical and full of surprises. The last time, from under the rim of Wembley Stadium on the Tunnel of Love tour four years ago, all I could think of was Sly Stallone: prime beefcake, heavy and slow, ten times larger than life and 100 per cent synthetic. There wasn't a single move that you couldn't have predicted a month in advance. Excess had become a way of life, which is also one's first reaction to the arrival of two new Springsteen albums, *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* (Columbia).

Looking back, it was when he started to pump iron that his music began to lose the qualities that had made it one of the few kinds of rock and roll worth listening to in the 1970s. The muscles he grew for *Born in the USA* in 1984 weren't just on his arms and shoulders. The music began to develop thickened biceps and pectorals of its own, forming unnatural contours in high definition, covered with a photogenic sheen of sprayed-on sump oil.

For me, the fascination of his career since the Brucemania of the mid-Eighties has been in watching him try to back himself out of that dead end – seeing whether he can surprise his audience while simultaneously satisfying their expectations, and, most of all, waiting for him to reawaken within himself the sensitive responses that made his first five albums so compellingly different from the competition. It's a lot to ask, especially in rock and roll, where one good idea is usually enough for a whole career. And if it hadn't been for a couple of songs on his last album, I might have given up asking it of Bruce Springsteen altogether.

Tunnel of Love, released four years ago, was in one respect his *Blood on the Tracks*: like Dylan's middle-period masterpiece, it seems to have been the product of a disintegrating marriage, and its two completely successful songs – "Brilliant Disguise" and "One Step Up" – combined good hooks with emotional truth. They brought him to the brink of fulfilling the potential we'd glimpsed in 1981, when he closed *The River* with "Wreck on the Highway", a quiet but disturbing portrayal of a man settling for domestic imperfection, set to a gentle country tune. Here he defined dirty realism well before the term was coined, and – deceptively, as it turned out – appeared to offer a farewell to the cars-and-girls world of his (and our) prolonged adolescence.

The River was a double album, but it was fit to burst with fun and ideas. Every song had some special quality of its own. A dozen years later, the same cannot be said of *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*. It had seemed reasonable, based on the information that they'd been recorded consecutively, before and after the birth of his first child, to expect two different records: one by Stallone, maybe, followed by one from Pacino. An hour of Stallone would certainly have been a price worth paying for an hour with Pacino. Yet, as it turns out, that isn't the case at all. There's barely a hair's breadth of difference between them. You could say that *Lucky Town*, the later of the two, is slightly more informal, slightly less arranged, but you'd be pushing it. Really, if you were to shuffle the songs and play them at random, you wouldn't be able to sort them back into two piles.

Common to both albums are a handful of those big rockers with the heavy snare-drum backbeat that's like having a Victorian wardrobe dropped on your head every 0.8 seconds, and a sprinkling of swampy, soulful ballads on which he wants to sound like the young Elvis in heat. The models for these are "Born in the USA" and "I'm on Fire" respectively, and he doesn't seem interested in taking either species much further. There are lots of cars and girls and rivers and rain and images of a man at work and prayer, just as his critics would expect. (The other night, on *The Late Show*, I heard Billy Bragg berating him for continuing to write love songs that feature terms like "girl", "baby" and "darling". So tell me something, Billy. As Phil Everly once inquired of his brother Don, "How do *you* call your baby home?")

As with *Tunnel of Love*, Springsteen has abandoned the faithful E Street Band in favour of doing most of the work himself, with the help of a few good session musicians. It would be easy, but wrong, to say that all the overdubbing robs the music of spontaneity; nor, frankly, can you tell the difference between Max Weinberg's drumming and Jeff Porcaro's, between Garry Tallent's bass-playing and Randy Jackson's. They're playing to Springsteen's patterns, and there isn't much room for individual manoeuvre.

Somewhere underneath all this, though, beats the heart of the man who wrote "Thunder Road" and "Racing in the Street", and there are moments when he steps away from the genre pieces to try something new. "57 Channels (And Nothin' On)" is a very funny rockabilly talking-blues about shooting up the TV, in the style of Johnny Bond's old "Hot Rod Lincoln"; it would have been a far more imaginative choice as a first single than "Human Touch", on which he comes distressingly close to self-parody. "Souls of the Departed" is a meditation on death driven by a shivering, down-and-dirty combination of slide guitar and harmonica. "Soul Driver", on which he duets with Sam Moore, once of Sam and Dave, investigates a few textures that are new to his music. And on "Man's Job" and "Real Man" he does something brave: he looks hard at masculinity. In the first, he plays the character of someone who thinks that the only way to impress a girl is to show her your muscles; in the second, he's a man who has recognised that Rambo isn't any kind of role model, and that there are other ways to be with a woman and feel like a man. But because he chooses to set these thoughts to music that sounds like it's firing on 100-octane testosterone, he runs the risk – as he did with "Born in the USA", which preached scepticism but was picked up and used as a patriotic campaign anthem by Ronald Reagan – of being completely, utterly and very damagingly misunderstood.

There's less about babies on *Lucky Town* than I'd expected to hear. In "Souls of the Departed" he looks at violent death – in the Gulf and the gang wars of Los Angeles – and thinks about how he'd feel if that soldier, that gang member, had been his own son. It's a feeling probably all new fathers have, but he doesn't overdo it. "Living Proof" takes the subject a lot more seriously, viewing parenthood as redemption. No doubt that's how he saw it at the time – but, hey, everybody gets born, you know?

Sounds/Chris Smith

BRUCE IS LOOSE

74
SOUNDS
By Chris Smith
Have you heard the news?
There's good Springsteen.

"...On his new albums, Springsteen emerges from the disorienting tunnel of love trying to focus his eyes and his emotions..."

HE'S THE ONE: *Springsteen dresses down for his return.*

UGLY BRUCE IS BACK. THE LAST TIME WE saw Springsteen, the scruffy guy from New Jersey was trussed in a starched white shirt, bolo tie, and sport jacket, his hair slicked back like some Herb Ritts vision of a rock star. On 1987's *Tunnel of Love,* he looked uncomfortable and sounded tense.

But now the open-shirted, unshaven Springsteen has returned. On the covers of his two new albums, **Human Touch** and **Lucky Town** (Columbia Records), Springsteen is all silver earrings, crosses, and bandito belt buckles, looking as if he'd awakened from a night's sleep under the Asbury Park boardwalk to go shopping for a new wardrobe at an L.A. barrio garage sale. The music on *Lucky Town* and *Human Touch* doesn't cut loose with the wild, angry abandon of his most sartorially repulsive album, *Darkness on the Edge of Town,* but having cast off a wife and his band of seventeen years, Springsteen sounds like a free—if heavily burdened—man once again.

Tunnel of Love was an artful tale of ambivalence: The strains in his marriage to model/actress Julianne Phillips were readily apparent in the torment of "Brilliant Disguise," but by the end of the album Springsteen was professing his devotion; and while he recorded *Tunnel* without much help from the E Street Band, he still had his buddies waiting in the wings.

Since then, Springsteen's life has gone through a major upheaval: He's divorced Phillips, fired his band, married backup singer Patti Scialfa, and fathered two children. With *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town,* Springsteen emerges from the disorienting, pitch-black tunnel of love to find, instead of bright sunshine, a confusing haze. These two beautifully crafted albums are the work of a man blinking and squinting, trying to focus his eyes and his emotions. Sprung from the confines of a traditional rock-and-roll band, Bruce is loose: While he's still rooted in the stinging electric-guitar rock and soul of his previous nine albums—don't waste your time waiting for an L. L. Cool Bruce—Springsteen sounds refreshingly relaxed as he experiments with different textures from one song to the next.

Why are there two separate albums? The fourteen songs on *Human Touch,* recorded mostly in Los Angeles studios from 1989 to 1991, have a fuller, more traditional Springsteen sound: two electric guitars on most tunes, plus the workmanlike drumming of Jeff Porcaro and backing voices—including soul great Sam Moore and Scialfa—that complement Springsteen's rasp.

The ten *Lucky Town* songs, sparser in personnel but by no means raw, were recorded last year in just eight weeks, primarily in Springsteen's home studio in Beverly Hills. They've got an invigorating, spontaneous feel that signals his new sense of release. Though Springsteen and the E Street Band made some of the best rock of the seventies and eighties, by the end of their last tour, in 1988, they could be predictable: Here's the Clarence Clemons saxophone part, here's drummer Max Weinberg's big beat, here's the whiny harmony of Steve Van Zandt or Nils Lofgren. Springsteen had six guys on the payroll, and he loved putting them all to work.

Except for Roy Bittan, who makes a few keyboard appearances and co-produces some tunes, all the E Streeters are gone, and solitude has expanded Springsteen's sights, just as it did when he stripped down to make 1982's chilling *Nebraska.* On *Human Touch,* for instance, he's come up with a haunting country tune called "I Wish I Were Blind" that would have done Hank Williams proud. Sung in a quiet, twangy voice, it's the story of a bitter man spotting a former lover: "And though this world is filled/With the grace and beauty of God's hand/Oh I wish I were blind/When I see you with your man."

Then there's the cool jazz riff of "With Every Wish," a spellbinding meditation on the main theme of the two albums—that there's a price to pay for every dream come true. "Wish" floats along on the muted trumpet of Mark Isham, a lonely sound reminiscent of *Born to Run's* "Meeting Across the River." Springsteen pushes farther into the blues than ever before with the sneakily erotic "Cross My Heart," and he hasn't forgotten how to write the exuberant, straight-ahead rocker: "All or Nothin' at All" is a burning, two-chord macho challenge. "Pony Boy," a lovely children's lullaby, brings *Human Touch* to a delicate close.

Lucky Town gets off to a disappointing start: Springsteen resorts to an anthemic E Street–style shouter called "Better Days," a tune that some ad agency will rip off for a truck commercial. Later, even Springsteen sounds bored with "Leap of Faith," a get-out-there-and-try-again cheerleader that repeats the sentiments of the "Can't start a fire without a spark" chorus from *Born in the U.S.A.'s* "Dancing in the Dark."

The rest of *Lucky Town* sparkles. The songs are as meticulously written as anything Springsteen's ever done, but they're intimate without having the tight, agonizing quality that marked so much of *Tunnel of Love.* The highlight of Springsteen's newfound freedom is "Local Hero," which sounds as if it was recorded in one spontaneous take in the middle of the night. Scialfa bangs away on tambourine, Springsteen wails on harmonica, playing it all the way through the tune as though his harp were a rhythm guitar, and the sobering story of a man bumping into his own fame spools raucously out. In "Local Hero," Springsteen replaces the pious uplift of *Born in the U.S.A.'s* "My Hometown" with an edgy humor: He can't help laughing when he goes into a kitschy hometown store and finds a black velvet painting of himself hanging between portraits of a Doberman and Bruce Lee.

There's little to separate the two albums thematically, though *Lucky Town* is moodier and marginally more personal: Written after the birth of Springsteen's children, it includes a touching vow of marital solidarity ("If I Should Fall Behind"), a sharply observed, Raymond Carveresque wedding-day snapshot ("Book of Dreams"), and a rich, poetic celebration of the mysteries of fatherhood that's shouted out in Springsteen's best over-the-top vocal style ("Living Proof").

What's common to both albums is Springsteen's repetitive, nearly Talmudic examination of good and evil. He's such a talented lyricist that you forgive him for saying the same thing over and over again; as he broods about the difficulties of being an honorable family man, though, it's possible to see him as born to run in place. But what—now that he's 42, with a second marriage less than a year old and two tiny children calling him Daddy—do you expect to be uppermost in Springsteen's mind? Though in the past he threw in a fair share of libidinous roof-raisers, Springsteen has always been admirably oblivious of pop trends, and his lyrics have long revolved around questions of loyalty, responsibility, and love—subjects never more timely than right now. And he's not the first man to be spiritually enthralled by fatherhood.

Though he's always played out biblical battles in his music, this time Springsteen lays on the religious imagery pretty thick: "Your breasts were the altar/Your body was the holy land," he sings at one point. If it was hard to be a saint in the city, as Springsteen sang in 1973, he's found it's all too easy to be a sinner in Beverly Hills. One song, however, stands out as a spiritual inventory and shows that Springsteen's latest reckoning has left him with an uneasy peace. On the terrific "Lucky Town," Springsteen's exaggerated nasal tone recalls one of his early idols, Bob Dylan, another man who's had his wrestling matches with the divine. "When it comes to luck you make your own," Springsteen sings, sounding both triumphant and humble. "Tonight I got dirt on my hands, but I'm building me a new home."

So what if he's not the spotless savior of rock and roll? Springsteen always did look better a little mussed up. ■

Photograph by Pam Springsteen

The Boss still has touch for ticket sales

By Edna Gundersen
USA TODAY June 9/92

He may be losing steam on the charts, but Bruce Springsteen remains a rock powerhouse. He proved it all weekend, first with a fiery sneak preview of his summer tour, then with a blitz of ticket sales that contradict suggestions of waning popularity.

An estimated 8 million listeners tuned in for Friday's live radio broadcast of Springsteen's energetic "Dress Rehearsal" concert, staged in a Hollywood sound studio before 200 radio contest winners and music-industry people.

Saturday, fans in six cities scooped up tickets to 21 shows, including all 220,000 tickets to 11 shows at the Brendan Byrne Arena in East Rutherford, N.J. The 11 sell-outs break the venue's record of 10, set by Springsteen in 1984.

Two shows in Washington, D.C., sold out in 1½ hours. By mid-day, eight shows in Boston, Cleveland, Detroit and Philadelphia were nearly sold out.

Yet his albums *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* have slipped to Nos. 34 and 55 in *Billboard.* Each has sold 1.5 million copies in the USA; global sales of both total 8 million.

If Springsteen is worried about his chart standing, he didn't let on during Friday's lighthearted performance. He joked about gazing into a crystal ball and seeing his albums "going back up the charts ... past Def Leppard, past Kris Kross, even past Weird Al!"

Alluding to slow sales of his *Human Touch/Better Days* single, he said, "I'm gonna be coming your way all this summer, playing a lot of almost-hits and some real ones too!"

More seriously, he said, "I'm here for the long ride."

Bruce's Lucky Touch

Two new albums put Springsteen back in the rock & roll spotlight

By James Henke

THE LONG WAIT IS OVER. BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN is back, and he hasn't forgotten how to rock.

That message came through loud and clear on March 4th, when two new Springsteen songs, "Human Touch" and "Better Days," began dominating radio. By the end of that week, "Human Touch" was the most-added song on Top Forty, album-rock and adult-contemporary stations.

According to *Radio and Records*, ninety-one percent of all album-rock stations that report to the magazine were programming "Human Touch," making it the Number One song on that format. ("Better Days" entered *R&R*'s album-rock chart at Number Five.) At Top Forty, or CHR, radio, 177 of 230 reporting stations added "Human Touch" its first week out. "It's a hell of an accomplishment," said Joel Denver, *Radio and Records*' CHR editor, "particularly at a time when it's not hip to be rocking out on CHR."

In fact, radio's response to the single seemed to dispel some music-industry doubts about how well Springsteen would fare this time out, given that it's been nearly five years since he released his last studio album, *Tunnel of Love*, and that many of his songs are now tackling more obviously adult themes. The week before the double-A-sided single was released, *Billboard* magazine had reported that pop radio was "concerned about overexposure of past Springsteen hits and his current relevance to its audience." *Billboard* also reported that Sony Music, Springsteen's label, had decided to play it safe, limiting initial shipments of the two albums to 1.5 million each (*Tunnel of Love* sold about 3 million copies).

"They [Sony] don't want too many albums in the field," said Russ Solomon, owner of the Tower Records chain. "With Michael Jackson, they shipped 4 million, and they haven't sold them off yet. If an album is sitting around in large quantities in a record store, it looks stale."

Solomon added that Springsteen's long layoff was cause for some concern: "Whether the fans who are now five years older care that much, I don't know." But Solomon and other retailers were still optimistic that Springsteen's new albums, *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*, would do very well when they reach the stores on March 31st. "Great artists have tremendous followings," Solomon said, "and Springsteen certainly is a great artist. These records could take off like nobody's business."

"We think they're going to be monstrous," said Lew Garrett, vice-president of purchasing for the Camelot chain. "Springsteen appeals to a demographic that has money in their pockets and isn't afraid to spend it."

Though early reports had indicated that *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* – Springsteen's tenth and eleventh albums – were vastly different in style, both are essentially straight-ahead, guitar-driven rock LPs, and there are no dramatic departures from his previous work. But the breakup of the E Street Band following the Human Rights Now! Tour in 1988 gave Springsteen the freedom to record with different musicians for virtually the first time in his career, and there are a few songs on the two albums that probably would not have surfaced on an E Street album.

Springsteen, who's now forty-two, began making *Human Touch* in late 1989, using a core group that included former E Street Band member Roy Bittan on keyboards and sessionmen Jeff Porcaro (of Toto fame) on drums and Randy Jackson (who's worked with Journey, among others) on bass. The first song they recorded was "Roll of the Dice," a rousing rocker written by Springsteen and Bittan that would not have sounded out of place on an E Street Band album.

The LP includes several other uptempo tracks: "Soul Driver," which features Sam Moore, formerly of Sam and Dave, on vocals and David Sancious, an early E Street Band member, on Hammond organ; "Gloria's Eyes," one of several tracks on which Springsteen serves up some stinging guitar; "The Long Goodbye," another guitar-heavy rocker; the more soulful "Real World"; and "All or Nothin' at All," a two-chord scorcher.

The album's funniest track is "57 Channels," which opens with Bob Glaub's thumping bass line and tells the story of a man who "bought a bourgeois [*Cont. on 23*]

SPRINGSTEEN

[*Cont. from 15*] house in the Hollywood Hills," installed cable TV and then a satellite dish ("home entertainment was my baby's wish"), only to find that "there was 57 channels and nothin' on." He finally buys a .44 Magnum, "and in the blessed name of Elvis, well, I let it blast."

In a more serious vein is "With Every Wish," a spare, haunting ballad that features Springsteen on acoustic guitar, Mark Isham on trumpet, Kurt Wortman on drums and Doug Lunn on bass. Musically, it recalls *Born to Run*'s "Meeting Across the River." The lyrics deal with wishes that come true: "Before you choose your wish, son/You better think first/With every wish there comes a curse."

Springsteen finished *Human Touch* – which includes fourteen songs and contains nearly an hour of music – in early 1991. But almost immediately he had an unexpected burst of creativity and began writing again. One of the first songs he came up with was "Living Proof." For a while, he considered adding it to *Human Touch*, but the song – obviously inspired by his young son, Evan James – didn't seem to fit. "There was a different voice there," said a source familiar with the project. "It became apparent that something had happened, that he was in a different mode."

Springsteen went on to record the ten songs on *Lucky Town*, including "Better Days," in about eight weeks, working at his home in Los Angeles. Bittan and Jackson rejoined him, but Porcaro was unavailable, so drummer Gary Mallaber, whose résumé includes stints with Van Morrison and the Steve Miller Band, was recruited.

The album has a loose, stripped-down sound, especially compared to the more polished *Human Touch*. It includes two beautiful ballads: the love song "If I Should Fall Behind," with Springsteen on bass and acoustic guitar, and "Book of Dreams," a touching wedding-day portrait. There are other overt allusions to Springsteen's family life: In "Souls of the Departed," a rocker, he sings about a seven-year-old boy who was murdered in a Compton, California, schoolyard, then adds: "As I tuck my own son in bed/All I can think is what if it'd been him instead."

One source summed up the difference between the albums by saying that on *Human Touch*, Springsteen is "struggling for the meaning of happiness: What does it mean to be a man?" On the second album, "he's realized he's happy, and he's trying to find out what that means."

Springsteen is expected to be on the road by the summer, but at press time tour plans were still being worked out. ♫

Additional reporting by Michael Goldberg.

New Bruce: Lose Your Illusions

By Anthony DeCurtis

WITH HIS TWO NEW albums — his first in nearly five years and first as a declared solo artist — Bruce Springsteen completes an emotional triptych begun in 1987 with *Tunnel of Love*. On that album, "Tougher Than the Rest" articulates the early Springsteen code on love: Commitment is a triumph of the will. You make a vow, you keep it. But at the center of that album stand three songs — "Tunnel of Love," "Two Faces" and "Brilliant Disguise" — that suggest the virtual impossibility of knowing yourself well enough (let alone another person) to make any vow meaningful forever. To enter the tunnel of love is to take a night journey on which the definitions of your identity dissolve and you encounter aspects of yourself that seem profoundly foreign and disturbing. In short, *Tunnel of Love* is a study of deception — and more chillingly, self-deception — in matters of the heart.

Human Touch (begun in 1989, completed in early 1991) and *Lucky Town* (recorded in a two-month burst shortly after *Human Touch*) describe the effort of building a realistic life after the code has been shattered, in Springsteen's case by an affair and a divorce. Intriguing companion pieces, they're *Lose Your Illusion I* and *II*.

Beginning with the pulsing title track, which stands among Springsteen's best work, the fourteen songs on *Human Touch* explore the movement from disenchanted isolation to a willingness to risk love and its attendant traumas again. At first the moves are tentative, motivated more by loneliness — a need for "a little of that human touch" — than by love's golden promise or, even more remote, the prospect of actual lasting happiness with another human being. Also, as the bluesy "Cross My Heart" makes clear, the certainties of the past ("Once you cross your heart/You ain't ever supposed to lie") are starting to be replaced by a more shaded outlook: "Well you may think the world's black and white/And you're dirty or you're clean/You better watch out you don't slip/Through them spaces in between."

Aptly, the introspective, self-questioning mood of *Human Touch* shifts near its midpoint with "Roll of the Dice," the most generic-sounding Springsteen rocker — glockenspiel and all — on either of these albums. With renewed energy, even optimism, the singer accepts the emotional dangers of love and his own failings ("I'm a thief in the house of love/And I can't be trusted"), stops fretting and determines to get on with living. The superb "Real World" then offers an inspiringly lucid vision of a love that can sidestep fantasy to take a dignified place in "the real world," and the slamming "All or Nothin' at All," graced by a soaring, catchy chorus, insists on commitment rather than flees it.

After that, however, both "Man's Job" and "Real Man" flirt perilously with soft, contemporary clichés about masculinity ("If I can find the guts to give you all my love/Then I'll be feelin' like a real man"). Fortunately, Springsteen stops short of songs about his inner child or flagging self-esteem. The slick, annoyingly seductive keyboard riff of "Real Man" also ventures closer to Phil Collins territory than anything Springsteen has done before. More positively, "Pony Boy," a traditional tune performed acoustically by Springsteen on guitar and harmonica, with his wife, Patti Scialfa, providing harmony, closes *Human Touch* on a tender, disarming note.

The childlike charm of "Pony Boy" provides an effective, understated transition to *Lucky Town*, on which Springsteen examines his life as a family man, negotiates a truce with his demons and achieves a hard-won sense of fulfillment. Dedicated to Scialfa and the couple's two children, the album's ten songs paint a convincing — and only rarely cloying — portrait of domestic life and its contents. The rousing opener, "Better Days," ably sets the tone; it's a bracing antinostalgia blast that asserts: "These are better days baby/Better days with a girl like you." The song also takes on with impressive candor the Springsteen myth ("It's a sad funny ending to find yourself pretending/A rich man in a poor man's shirt") and the immeasurable degree of his material comfort ("A life of leisure and a pirate's treasure/Don't make much for tragedy").

With characteristic sure-footedness, however, Springsteen does not permit heartfelt satisfaction to slip into self-satisfaction. If "Leap of Faith," "If I Should Fall Behind," "Living Proof" and "Book of Dreams" all convey a nearly swooning appreciation of the pleasures that a settled home life affords, "The Big [*Cont. on 67*]

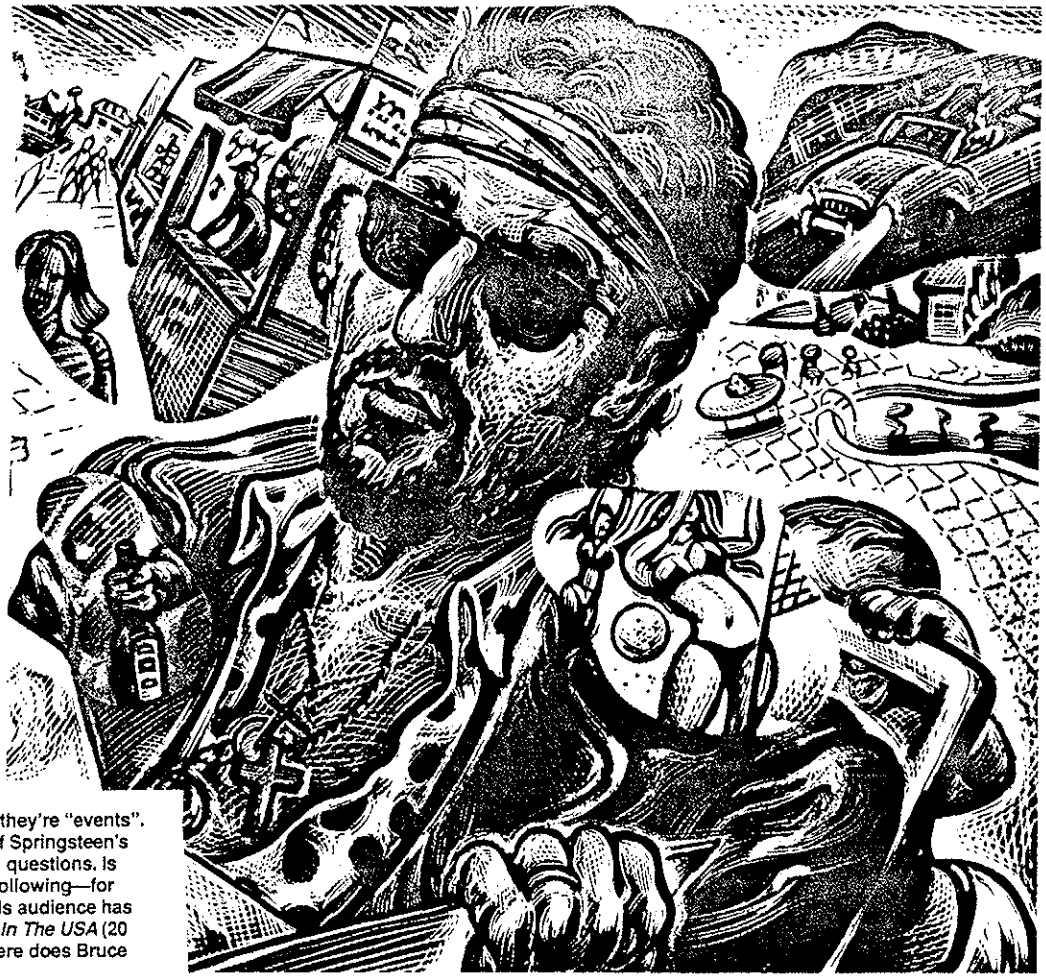
Springsteen

[*Cont. from 56*] Muddy," "Souls of the Departed" and "My Beautiful Reward" intimate that, for Springsteen at least, the attainment of love is inextricable from the fear of its loss. A brooding blues evocatively colored by Springsteen's acoustic slide guitar, "The Big Muddy" takes a knowing look at infidelity, greed and moral compromise, concluding, "There ain't no one leavin' this world buddy/Without their shirttail dirty/Or their hands bloody." The churning, guitar-driven "Souls of the Departed" depicts the singer, one of "the self-made men" in the Hollywood Hills, under siege as violence rages in the Middle East and, closer by, in East Compton. The death of a child in a barrio shooting causes him to wonder, in an aching drawl, "Tonight as I tuck my own son in bed/All I can think of is what if it would've been him instead."

"My Beautiful Reward," an elegant, folkish ballad, ends *Lucky Town* on an almost surreally unsettled note. The calm, gentle music belies dreamlike imagery of falling, wandering and abandonment. The striking verse that closes the song and the album — "Tonight I can feel the cold wind at my back/I'm flyin' high over gray fields my feathers long and black/Down along the river's silent edge I soar/Searching for my beautiful reward" — harks back to the restlessness at the heart of *Human Touch* and hints of a darkness on the edge of *Lucky Town*.

Musically, neither of these two albums represents much of a departure for Springsteen, despite the breakup of the E Street Band. Produced by Springsteen, Jon Landau, Chuck Plotkin and former E Street Band keyboardist Roy Bittan, *Human Touch* is more richly textured than *Lucky Town*, which Springsteen recorded in his home studio and pretty much produced himself, with help from the other three men. Along with the impeccable Bittan on keyboards, the studio pros on hand for *Human Touch* — bassist Randy Jackson and drummer Jeff Porcaro — do fine; Porcaro even manages on occasion to approach the muscle and finesse of the brilliant E Street Band drummer, Max Weinberg. Springsteen handles virtually all instruments except drums (played by Gary Mallabar) on *Lucky Town* with expressiveness and flair; on both albums his guitar playing is plentiful and gripping, a cry from the soul.

Without question, the aesthetic and thematic aims of *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* would have been better realized by a single, more carefully shaped collection that eliminated their half-dozen or so least essential songs. But taken together, the two albums chart the fascinating progress of one of the most compelling artists of our time, a man who has found what he was looking for and who is searching still. ■



BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
Human Touch
(Columbia 471423)
Lucky Town
(Columbia 471424)

Records like these aren't "releases" any more: they're "events". These two discs, housing nearly 100 minutes of Springsteen's first original material since *Tunnel Of Love*, beg questions. Is Springsteen a victim of the market-place now, following—for Chrissakes—the strategy of Guns N' Roses? His audience has diminished since the avalanche of 1984's *Born In The USA* (20 million sold to *Tunnel Of Love*'s six) so just where does Bruce Springsteen's constituency lie now?

In a sense, with these two albums, he's covering his bases: *Human Touch* is a more rock'n'roll record, which will strike a rousing chord with the '84 audience; while *Lucky Town* is a more reflective and contemplative work, which should find favour with bleaker Bruce fans.

Human Touch, the record over which he laboured long months, is Springsteen by the yard: largely unremarkable rockers ('Gloria's Eyes', 'Man's Job', 'Long Goodbye') which recall the pounding emptiness of 'Crush On You', 'You Can Look...' and 'Ramrod'. This is Springsteen going for the clenched-fist-in-the-air crowd, the Brooooooooce fans. Only 'Roll The Dice' catches a fragment of the sweeping power of the E. Street Band—and significantly that track is co-written with the ESB's Roy Bittan. 'Real Man' has a blast of brass, introducing a song about dating on a Saturday night which sounds farcical—a 43-year-old dwelling on teenage angst. Ironically, the throwaway '57 Channels' (premièred at the Christie Benefit in 1990) has matured with age, and now a sombre bass runs through the 145-second song at a similar tempo to 'I'm On Fire', as Bruce blasts his vacuous TV *"in the blessed name of Elvis"*.

Among the slower songs 'I Wish I Were Blind' is a bitter and twisted song of love betrayed, in which Righteous Brother Bobby Hatfield's guest vocal ebbs unremarkably into the background. 'Pony Boy' is a lullaby for Evan James, little more nor less, but nonetheless beguiling, recalling Paul Simon's similar 'St Judy's Comet'. A low-key end to a strange album. (5)

Lucky Town, the record that leapt phoenix-like from the embers of *Human Touch*, *is* worth the wait, a mature reflection from a man in love but not at peace. Opening with a blistering 'Better Days', this is the sound of the Boss regaining his turf: *"Tonight this fool feels halfway to Heaven and just a mile outta Hell"*. The title track is a brooding, hypnotic rocker, while 'Local Hero' rolls along like 'I'm Going Down', with Bruce cruising through his hometown, spotting a picture of somebody who once *was* somebody.

This is the album that brims over with confidence in turmoil: 'If I Should Fall Behind', 'Big Muddy' and 'Book Of Dreams' are Springsteen in top gear, and room could easily have been found for 'Living Proof'—a song about lost faith, true love and redemption—on *Nebraska*. 'Sons Of The Departed', which thematically recalls 'Wreck On The Highway', dwells in a bitter, dark place where *"your silence poses as honour"*.

Lucky Town is the work of a man who has grown up with rock'n'roll, but has seen it replaced as Holy Grail by marriage and fatherhood. At his best, Springsteen brought soaring exultance to stultified rock; maturing, he delivered painful introspection, an honesty which surfaced on *Darkness On The Edge Of Town*, *Nebraska* and *Tunnel Of Love*, and which can be found again on *Lucky Town*. For Springsteen, this album is—as its final track has it—'My Beautiful Reward'. (9)

Patrick Humphries

A BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN Cruising familiar territory but getting pretty good traction

UNBLINKING

Love, disaster, humiliation, recovery: a double dose of the unembarrassable Bruce Springsteen.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
Human Touch
CBS
■■□□□
Lucky Town
CBS
■■■■□

The Boss man's dilemma has always been to reconcile his introverted, critically lionised work ('Nebraska') with the tub-thumping rockers that bring home the moolah ('Born In The USA'). Here Springsteen gets to keep his cake, eat it and smear the remains over that oft-exposed chest by releasing a brace of LPs that together show: The Two Sides Of Bruce.

'Human Touch' is the kind of album that record executives hear when they dream about heaven. The title track will by now be familiar to everyone not engaged in deep space exploration, and its accessible, stadium-friendly sound sets a tone for the whole record. '57 Channels' may be Bruce's back-to-the-bar room-blues but only if the bar in question can seat 15,000 and sells sweat shirts at 50 bucks apiece.

'Lucky Town' is a different carton of boiled fruit altogether. Songs like 'Local Hero' or the very beautiful 'If I Should Fall Behind' are much more reflective, less direct and at least on nodding terms with reality. Unencumbered by the pensionable sessioneers who populate the 'Human Touch' album, Springsteen sounds willing to broaden his ambitions, and, as a result, produces some of his most thoughtful work since 'The River'.

Sadly, 'Human Touch' shows that Bruce is probably *still* the future of rock 'n' roll. But when he can produce records like 'Lucky Town' who really cares?

ANDREW COLLIS

KEVIN WESTENBERG

SELECT
May 92

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
Human Touch
COLUMBIA 471423 ★★★★★
Lucky Town
COLUMBIA 471 424 ★★★★

After managing only three LPs of new material in the last 10 years, Bruce Springsteen suddenly bowls up with two on the same day. Unlike Guns N' Roses' Use Your Illusion I and II, this is not simply a way of off-loading a glut of material. Springsteen has traditionally recorded more than required and either parcelled out the surplus on B-sides or, more frequently, held songs over until they could be found an appropriate home. In rejecting early band recordings of the Nebraska material in favour of releasing the original demos and in sequencing the 40 tracks of his mid-'80s live set without including an obvious hit like Glory Days because it didn't "fit", Springsteen has underscored his conviction that an album exists to tell a story and should have no less integrity and structural unity than a novel.

Human Touch has been in the works for over a year. It's his first West Coast record and marks the official termination of a 15-year relationship with The E Street Band. Keyboardist Roy Bittan is the only former member still involved and most tracks use the rhythm section of studio heavyweights Jeff Porcaro and Randy Jackson. Springsteen plays all the lead guitar, there is no saxophone and little of the romantic swell and pop filigree of E Street music. From its bellicose drum sound (played loud, recorded louder), tough-as-teak guitars and roaring vocals to the blunt, unambiguous lyrics, Human Touch is raw but nevertheless ambitious stuff, with no place for arty euphemism or rockular evasions.

Tunnel Of Love placed just enough distance between his own and his characters' lives to allow the listener to find the record absorbing without feeling like a spectator at a terrible accident. In the time since then he has had his first marriage go publicly awry (a song he wrote for Southside Johnny last year opened with the sober admission "I know what it's like to have failed...with the whole world looking on"), married Patti Scialfa and seen the birth of his first two children at an age when many of his fellow fortysomethings are dealing with adolescent offspring. Human Touch is not wasting much time disguising its inspiration: its themes are love, disaster, humiliation and recovery; its text might as well be taken from The Book Of Soul, in which it is written that the wise man eventually and painfully learns the difference between those things which are desirable and those which are needful.

There are few of the familiar pit stops of the old songs, the topical and geographical references. Instead, Springsteen navigates a classical landscape of the heart, as mythical and ghostly as the blasted topography of gospel music, with its rivers and forests, its prisons and cages and bread from the skies. Thus it is fitting that Sam Moore and Bobby King are providing the vocal afterburners on songs like Soul Driver and Man's Job. Like Elvis Costello on Get Happy!, Springsteen on Human Touch draws strength from banging up against the great vigour of Stax and Atlantic R&B.

The keynotes are the title song, with its regal three-chord figure (doubtless written as a live show opener) and tongue-in-cheek automotive reference to "a little touch-up, a little paint"; the howling, feverish rocker Gloria's Eyes and its suggestion of the betrayal of a lover, an admirer and maybe even a fan; Man's Job, in which he gets near to his dream of singing like Roy Orbison; finally, I Wish I Were Blind where, with the assistance of Righteous Brother Bobby Hatfield, he finds and sustains the pitch and panache required to bring off as tragically romantic a song as he's ever composed. Following Real Man, a close relation of the stage favourite I'm A Coward When It Comes To Love, he appends an acoustic version of the traditional children's song Pony Boy, at which point the younger end of his following will probably give him up for good.

Where rock'n'roll was built upon the cult of he who is misunderstood, both Human Touch and its companion record Lucky Town deal with the man who misunderstands himself. There are no father or mother, no boss or President songs here. On Better Days, the opening track of Lucky Town, he squarely concedes that a millionaire rock star's life "don't make much for tragedy" while confessing that "it's a sad man...who's living in his own skin and can't stand the company".

Lucky Town came about when he went into the studio intending to complete Human Touch and found the material pouring forth. Most tracks feature Randy Jackson and Gary Mallaber and, significantly, a vocal trio made up of Lisa Lowell, Patti Scialfa and Soozie Tyrell. Where Human Touch is dense and highly worked, Lucky Town has an infectious swagger characterised by the gospel chorusing of the female voices, hammering acoustic guitars and comparatively loose delivery. There are more smiles here, and certainly less desperation.

Local Hero sends up the cult of his own personality, If I Should Fall Behind is a curious song of romantic dedication and Book Of Dreams takes us right through his recent wedding day with altogether unblinking sentimentality. Were it not for the inclusion of the angry Souls Of The Departed, which links the dead on the road to Basra with the victims of LA's gang wars and the fate of their own son, and the deceptively serene My Beautiful Reward, it would be tempting to try and stand Lucky Town up as Springsteen's wedding present to his wife. Compared to Human Touch's 14 songs, Lucky Town's 10 fly by like an EP.

Its high water mark is Living Proof, a number which is, in its way, quite as deeply felt and ringing as Born To Run; but where the latter offered the mirage of escape, Living Proof suggests flight from a self-made prison through the forgiveness provided by the birth of a child.

Like much of these two LPs, Living Proof is Springsteen the unembarrassable doing what he does best, occupying the moment he's travelling through, illuminating it with sheer strength of feeling and projecting it That Big to communicate with a massive audience.

On the way, both albums have their misfires, their occasional lapses into kitsch and sometimes a lack of harmonic colour, but as the age span of the rock audience grows too wide to be meaningfully encompassed by any one artist, they find Springsteen thundering off into middle age, leading with his chin, his recklessness unimpaired.

David Hepworth

The man who misunderstands himself.

LIVING PROOF... In the midst of his first public appearance with his new stage band, at the Bottom Line on May 6, Bruce Springsteen paused to reflect on the burning down of his current hometown. He said a lot of the right things--that the riots were a reflection of both "righteous anger" and of the "estrangement" of everybody in this society, and that the danger came from denial, from imagining "that quiet is the same thing as peace."

I ran through a mental list of the songs he might be leading up to: **"Souls of the Departed,"** where Bruce envisions himself building a wall in the Hollywood hills to protect his child from the wars raging in the streets below; **"Big Muddy,"** where he painfully whoops, "Poison snake bites and you're poisoned, too"; **"Human Touch"** for what both cops and jurors lacked; **"57 Channels,"** as an indictment of the idiotic media response.

Instead, he sang **"If I Should Fall Behind,"** the most intimate song on either of his two new albums, the one that sounds like wedding vows. If he'd broken into a passage from Rousseau's "The Social Contract," the effect couldn't have been more shocking...or appropriate. He'd put his finger on exactly what it was a rich white rock star could say about the situation that might be healing and helpful.

I'm not trying to tell you that **Human Touch** and **Lucky Town** are in any way "about" the condition of Los Angeles and America today. Their subject is Bruce Springsteen and his recent life. But after that show, something I'd been accepting on faith snapped into focus: That these songs had a relationship to other lives, too.

Well, if Springsteen hopes to reconnect--and connection is the source of all his wealth and glory--his work's cut out. The show at the Bottom Line and the Saturday Night Live appearance where he used **"57 Channels"** to take a brief, oblique rip at George Bush were steps in that direction. A longer stride was choosing to end his SNL stint with **"Living Proof,"** not only the best of the new songs he's written but the one that comes closest to a pure confession of the downside of his own experience: **"You do some sad sad things/When it's you you're tryin' to lose."** The hardest part will be deciding what to do next--he's way, way beyond all the maps right now.

Springsteen knows what he can't do is deny his own life--even if it costs him part of his popularity to admit that he's a rich man who loves his wife and has found the greatest degree of contentment he's ever known by starting a family. He doesn't yet know what he can do--mostly because, ever the cautious man, he's only begun to try to find out.

On the new albums, Springsteen casts himself as Lucifer, the bright angel who found a kingdom only after a fall from grace into darkness. That darkness comes to life in the ghastly toasts in **"Soul Driver"** and **"Lucky Town,"** and in the final lines of **"With Every Wish."** Still, that tumble liberated Bruce. It's the source of the loving empowerment he finds in **"Man's Job"** and **"Better Days."** In **"Local Hero,"** it lets him laugh at his own superstar misery--and finally show his anger and disappointment at the messianic expectations that burden him.

So Springsteen has broken with the past, in part by rejecting the supernatural power he used to invest in his relationship with his audience. Having looked his own faithlessness hard in the eye--the persistent thread that links these songs is his own betrayal of his best instincts--he doesn't need to. Bruce takes a piss in fortune's sweet kiss, tells the angels to go hang, eyes his fans as though they mean to lynch him. He breaks down the implicit contract between a star and his audience by refusing to meet anybody's expectations: Those who want musical change frustrated by the pop-soul of **Human Touch**; those who want hits pushed away by the Dylanism of **Lucky Town**; the ones who need a hero confronted with the insistence he isn't one (**"Man's Job"** is much more convincing about this than **"Thunder Road"**); the ones who want stability confronted by a band that's younger, blacker and less reticent about challenging him musically.

As an artist whose essence is mass communication, Bruce would probably prefer that most of us like it rather than lump it. But his survival--as a man and an artist, if not a superstar--clearly depends on making this break, even if it leads him into a thicket of contradiction, from which the only way out is to drive the rest of the way in.--D.M.